Terrorist group shifts control — and objectives?

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There are indications here that one of the world's most active terrorist organizations may be turning to slightly different ends.

When Wadih Haddad died March 28 there was much speculation over the future of the terrorist empire he controlled.

Up to then its "successes" had included the simultaneous hijack of four U.S. and West European airliners to the Jordanian desert in 1970 and the killing of 28 bystanders at Israel's Lod airport in 1972. Its "failures" included the more recent hijacks which were terminated by an Israeli commando raid at Entebe, Uganda (1976), and by West German commandos at Mogadishu, Somalia (1977).

Backgrounds shared

Usually well-informed sources here now report, however, that some time before Dr. Haddad died he "bequeathed" his organization back to the control of his old friend George Habash, secretary-general of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

The friendship between the two men went back more than a quarter of a century, to the time when both were studying medicine at the American University of Beirut. Coming from similar backgrounds – both having been born into Eastern orthodox families in what was once northern Palestine – they shared a common vision of a future in which all "foreign" influence, including Zionist influence, would be removed from the "Arab nation."

'Operations' opposed

They therefore founded a group called the Arab Nationalist Movement, which in 1967 spawned the PFLP. Dr. Habash headed the new organization, while Dr. Haddad was in charge of what was euphemistically called its "external operations branch."

This branch made its first impact with the hijacking of an El-Al airliner to Algiers in 1968, which secured the release of 16 Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails.

Dr. Haddad's operatives reached the nadir of their glory with the multiple hijackings of September, 1970 – but already a tide of criticism of his tactics was growing up inside the PFLP.

At a PFLP congress in 1972, a clear majority came out against the continuation of Dr. Haddad's "external operations," but he continued them regardless from his new base in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad.

PFLP leaders including Dr. Habash denied any responsibility for Dr. Haddad's continued activities, but they resisted calls for his expulsion from the organization until some four years later. Dr. Haddad, meanwhile, deprived of some of his logistical support from the PFLP, forged new links with other terror outfits such as Uruguay's Tupamaros, Japan's Red Army, West Germany's Baader-Meinhoff gang, and the international terrorist Ilich Ramirez Sanchez, alias Carlos Martinez.

Dr. Haddad offered his new collaborators access to his training facilities in Iraq and elsewhere, in return for their help in continuing his organization's work. Together, they managed to stock up a kitty of millions of dollars in ransom payments. But, according to most reports, Dr. Haddad was always very much in charge.

Sources here report that it is this network, and all its assets, which has now passed back into mainstream PFLP control. But there remains some question whether the PFLP will continue to use them for terroristic ends which have very little to do with liberating Palestine.

Certainly, a speech delivered by George Habash at a memorial rally in Baghdad April 4 admitted that mistakes had been made. "But we will never," he vowed, "abide by the imperialists' criteria on terrorist actions."

On other occasions Dr. Habash has said clearly that he does not want to carry out actions that harm any "third party" in the contest between Israel and the Palestinians, though he would support attacks on Israeli targets elsewhere than in Israel.

Some observers here are therefore speculating that the terrorist organization which Wadih Haddad built up so painstakingly may now be turned to different purposes – though they do not deny the possibility of some adherents of Dr. Haddad's methods refusing to give up their terrorist ways.

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